DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 321 104 CE 055 272

AUTHOR Chanda, Noyona
TITLE Assessment of Prior Learning: A Common Sense Approach for ABE and ESOL.
INSTITUTION Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit, London (England).
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Access to Education; *Adult Basic Education; College Credits; *English (Second Language); Experiential Learning; Foreign Countries; *Nontraditional Students; *Prior Learning; Student Placement
IDENTIFIERS *Great Britain

ABSTRACT

This document makes the case for assessing prior learning and offers practical advice on how to do it within British English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and adult basic education (ABE) programs. Following an introduction, it is explained that a person's prior learning is obtained through prior study or life experiences. The next section explains why one would want to assess prior learning (to foster self-awareness, claim educational credit, plan a career, determine the level of entry in ABE or ESOL programs, or integrate experiential and academic learning). The next section lists characteristics of assessing prior learning and of initial assessment (identifies level of skill, highlights gaps in knowledge, establishes a starting point from the tutor's point of view, indicates content and methodology to students, takes note of what students can and cannot do, and categorizes students according to their performance on the spot). Four stages of assessment are listed: identifying the purpose of assessment; identifying learning experiences relevant to that purpose; analyzing these experiences in terms of knowledge, skills, and learning strategies; and demonstrating relevance. Examples include a student's guide to prior assessment and an illustration of how a teacher can help a student work with an English translation of his or her life story to identify prior learning. Four references are provided. (CML)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

ALBSU
Adult Literacy & Basic Skills Unit

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

M Smith

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED321104

ASSESSMENT OF PRIOR LEARNING:

A common sense approach for ABE and ESOL

Noyona Chanda sets out the case for assessing prior learning, and offers practical advice on methods. Noyona is Senior Lecturer, the Language and Numeracy Project, at the Language and Literacy Unit, Southwark College.

Introduction

Everybody's talking seriously now about 'assessing prior learning'. And so they ought to be. For a long time now, there has been a commitment to a range of adult learning theories. No matter which theory one subscribes to – whether it is the belief that adults learn by 'building strengths' or by 'filling in gaps in knowledge'; whether it is Kolb's 'learning cycle' or the simple faith that success or failure in adult learning is correlated to positive and negative learning experiences in the past – the underlying common denominator in each case is 'prior learning experience'. It is an indisputable fact that in order to maximise adult potential for learning, the learner (helped by the tutor) must establish meaningful connections between past (or 'prior') learning experiences and the present learning context. And so the continuous learning cycle remains in motion.

Taking notice of, and acknowledging, prior experiential learning is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, in ABE and ESOL, a great deal of literacy and language work has been stimulated by students' recalling their 'life experiences'. However, there is a distinction between simply recounting experiences of the past (including the experience of formal education/training) and being able to reflect on and generalise about the learning derived from those experiences. It is this distinction that has a direct bearing on the rate of progress of the adult learner, and understandably therefore, educators are interested in how to assess this source of learning potential. For students also, being able to evaluate prior learning in terms of knowledge, skills, attitudes and learning strategies would undoubtedly return to them a measure of control within the present learning situation.

What follows is (I hope) a common sense approach to assessment of prior learning in ABE and ESOL which the tutor could apply even without having to 'overhaul the system'!

What is Prior Learning?

There are two aspects to prior learning:

1. prior study or 'formal' learning

this is learning undertaken at an educational institution (school, college, etc) or a training establishment (armed forces, training establishment) where the learning programme was structured and teaching methods related to the flow of knowledge from teacher to student. Students would have participated by responding to teaching, and through the satisfactory completion of set tasks. Evidence of achievement of pre-set standards would have taken the form of tests, examinations, demonstrations of skill, etc, with certificates or diplomas or degrees for successful candidates.

2. prior experiential or 'informal' learning

this is the extra-institutional learning acquired from a wide variety of experiences through the course of one's life – experiences that range from having to support a family/oneself to work experience or dealing with a crisis. For students in adult basic education, this aspect of prior learning is particularly relevant – many of them are returning to study with a history of academic failure in traditional knowledge-based education, but with a range of life experiences that they do not value enough because it is 'experience' and not 'knowledge'. For ESOL students also, there is a range of life experiences – from experience of more than one culture and more than one language – that are characteristically undervalued by themselves and under-utilised in the adult learning and teaching context.

With many adult students, and especially with women, there is a rather simplistic polarisation between knowledge and experience. The *process* of assessing prior learning would help them to create a link between 'formal' and 'informal' learning.

Assessment of Prior Learning

If prior learning is to be used as a basis or resource for new learning, it has to be clearly identifiable and distinguishable from the experience itself. Learning derived from experience is often perceived as 'affective' learning, linked to observation and action rather than concrete experience leading to reflection, generalisation and conceptualisation. To put it simply, adults are often unaware of the transferability of their skills. They need

CE055272

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

strategies for analysing both prior study and prior experiential learning in terms of skills, knowledge, attitudes and awareness, and then to be able to establish relevancy to the learning context that they are now in.

The first step then is to establish a reason or purpose, for assessment of prior learning.

Why Assess Prior Learning?

There are a variety of reasons why adult students, and staff working with them, should want to assess prior learning. Outlined below are those reasons which I believe are particularly relevant to students in adult basic education and ESOL:

1. self-awareness: reflecting on life's experiences with a view to acknowledging and valuing them. Such a process might result in a product such as an autobiography or family record – excellent for building self-confidence and a positive attitude to adult learning.

2. educational/careers guidance: reflecting on prior learning (especially formal learning) in order to increase awareness of strengths and weaknesses, interests, successful learning, etc. as a starting point for planning the next step, either in terms of education or work or training.

3. claiming educational credit: being able to establish the equivalence of 'non-standard' credentials for entry on a course, or to claim advanced standing because of prior knowledge/ skills.

4. determining level of entry into ABE/ESOL: this is a purpose which is of particular interest and concern to all, because it is the first point of 're-engagement' with the learning cycle from a student's point of view, and hence a critical stage in 're-learning to learn'.

5. integrating experiential and academic learning: making connections between what the student knows from experience and the theoretical study of it, so as to provide a more meaningful and comprehensive educational experience. This applies particularly to many adult students of numeracy, who are proficient in their use of maths in everyday life, but anxious about the formal learning of the same.

6. becoming 'active' learners: being able to have a clear idea of learning goals and strategies for learning that are based on analysis of all prior learning experiences. In the context of ABE/ ESOL, this is of prime importance. Students need to feel a sense of ownership of the direction they are taking, not just because it is cosy and comforting to do so, but because they have made considered decisions about where they want to go, and have a realistic strategy for getting there, BASED ON THEIR OWN PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE (whether successful in the past or in spite of failure).

I believe that these purposes are not mutually exclusive – in fact, the role of ABE/ESOL is to facilitate and enable the adult student to develop and use the process of assessment all along the route of continuing education.

How to Assess Prior Learning?

Obviously, the purpose of the assessment affects the methods used, as also who should carry out the assessment. I think it is essential here to make a distinction between *Initial Assessment* and *Assessment of Prior Learning*, because in practice the one is often substituted for the other. In fact, both are necessary.

Assessment of prior learning

- Identifies sources of learning
- analyses nature of learning
- distinguishes between skills, knowledge, capacities
- raises consciousness about factors affecting learning
- takes stock of formal/informal prior learning experience
- suggests that student has responsibility towards own learning.

Initial assessment

- identifies level of skill
- highlights gaps in knowledge
- establishes 'starting point' (from tutor's point of view)
- indicates content and methodology to student
- takes note of what the student can/cannot do
- categorises student according to performance 'on the spot'.

Assessment of prior learning is clearly student–centred - the content and analysis cannot be anything but the individual's own – whereas the initial assessment is essentially tutor/ curriculum centred. It does not highlight strengths, but does show up weaknesses; it cannot throw any light on the likely causes for gaps in knowledge/skill, only indicate their existence. Assessment of prior learning as a pre-runner to initial

Example 1

THE STUDENT'S GUIDE TO ASSESSMENT OF PRIOR LEARNING

What is prior learning?

- It is what you learnt at school, college, work.
- It is also what you have learned through your experiences in everyday life.

What is assessment of prior learning?

- Assessment of prior learning is thinking back over your life and finding out how all the experiences you have had – at school and thereafter – could help you to be a more successful learner now.

How does it work?

- *Stage 1*
  What do you want to do now?
- *Stage 2*
  What have you learned in the past which could help you now?

  (Remember: it could be something you learned at school or college or through your experience of life).
- *Stage 3*
  How *exactly* will this past learning help you?

  Is it KNOWLEDGE related to what you now want to do?

  Is it a SKILL that is necessary or similar to what you will be doing now?

  Is it an UNDERSTANDING or AWARENESS that will make your new learning easier?

  Is it a METHOD OF LEARNING/MEMORISING that has been successful in the past?
- *Stage 4*
  How would you explain to someone else this connection between your 'prior' learning and what you want to do now?

  What are all the ways in which you could show EVIDENCE of this past learning?

assessment could pro.ide both tutor and student with the necessary ingredients for negotiating a realistic curriculum and planning a learning programme that takes account of the individual's strengths, weaknesses and capacities.

What then are the stages involved in assessment of prior learning? (Example 1)

Stage I

Identifying the purpose of assessment

Stage II

Identifying 'learning experiences' relevant to the purpose.

This is not easy to do, especially when there are no apparently related experiences or qualifications. A successful starting point is the personal history (Example 2a and 2b) or a recent life experience (Example 3) and then gradually refining the process of reflection in the search for relevancy.

Stage III

Analysing these experiences in terms of knowledge, skills and learning strategies

It is the capacity to reflect, generalise and conceptualise that indicates whether or not learning has taken place. Students have difficulty identifying for themselves what it is they have learned, and therefore require assistance in developing their skills of reflection. (see example 4)

Stage IV

Demonstrating relevance

Investigating the new learning context in order to 'match' own competences against the criteria required. The tutor's insight into the 'agenda' for a particular area of the curriculum could facilitate this process. (example 5)

In essence, what is happening is that a student is building a *personal portfolio* of information about qualities and skills, knowledge and experience from which he/she is able to extract and demonstrate the relevance of particular aspects in the light of specific criteria.

You would be quite right to point out that this is a lengthy, time-consuming exercise, and dependent on the establishment of confidence between tutor and student. It also relies heavily on good communication skills. I would argue that whilst portfolio preparation can be a course study in itself, a condensed form of it (ie. personal learning history) is an extremely useful instrument for:

- inducting the student into the present system;
- determining both content of curriculum and appropriate teaching methods;
- developing skills of self-assessment;
- drawing up a 'contract' for learning, in which the role of learner is clarified, as well as that of tutor.

Such a learning history could even be subject-specific, e.g. a maths learning history. (example 6)

Assessment of Prior Learning and the Bilingual Student

The assessment of prior learning assumes additional facets when applied to the case of the bilingual adult. The system perceives such a student as having 'non-standard' educational background, difficulty with communication in English, lacking in appropriate study skills and knowledge of how the system works; therefore the appropriate starting point is square one. The bilingual adult student generally agrees (often due to this very lack of knowledge and adequate English) and starts at square one. The resulting lack of motivation and non-ownership of the learning process conspire to keep the student at square one, or to move on at a slower than necessary pace.

Undertaking assessment of prior learning would considerably improve this situation. It would:

1. give the student a chance to describe the 'non-standard' background and thus recall past learning
2. acknowledge that the bilingual student already had language learning skills and the 'transferability' required to operate across two cultures and differing environments

Example 2A

English translation of 'life story' discussion in Punjabi. The tutor must now help the student to: (i) identify the sources of learning in the past; (ii) specify what learning took place; (iii) decide how this learning can be of help in the current learning situation *OR* what prior learning has equipped the student for (especially relevant to those seeking work).	
Born	1935
As a child and young adult:	lived in village in Punjab – hardly went to school – worked with family in small wheat field.
At age 20:	came to England – sponsored by family and supported by the local Punjabi community – no English at all – casual manual labour for Punjabi employers.
At age 26:	married Punjabi girl from own village in Punjab – wife got 'piece work' through community network – 3 children – wife got to know the 'system' because of the needs of the children – still very little communication outside of the Punjabi community – labouring for builders (for sub-contractors).
At age 30:	need for 'steady income' – applied in person for work in local bakery (work-force predominantly Punjabi) – worked in breadmaking department for 25 years – never made permanent because not able to read and understand Company's health and safety rules (condition of permanent employment).
Now 55:	made redundant (without any benefits from long service because of not being permanent) – not literate in either Punjabi or English – no real knowledge of the job market or how it works – Restart interview – "they told me to go and learn English – I need work", feels he is too old to learn – he will lose face in the community as well as his standing as a community 'elder'.

DISCUSS AND RECORD

Example 2B

Source of learning	*What learning?*	*How can it help now?*
• coming to a strange land • starting a new life • having to be under obligation	• people tell you all sorts of things; you have to find out the truth for yourself • accepting change; learning to be patient • wishing I had learned to read and write	• I have to decide what I want to learn • it will take time, but I know I want to learn
• marriage and family	• thinking long-term instead of just myself – children have to learn the ways in England • looking for work – what is "self-employed, discrimination and other words"	• what I do now is the first step in the direction that I have chosen • I am aware of change and of how I can meet the challenge • I have skills to offer • I must be confident in them
• working in the bakery	• rules, regulations • some people very clever – knowing how to get better job • training to use machines • if you're not good in English, you can't go very far • meeting targets • learned to fill in some forms (with help)	• If you want to succeed, you have to do things in the right way • I want to learn how to present myself in English • I need to learn how to read all the information • I already know the kinds of situation I need English communication skills for.
• children growing up	• their problems • knowing English, they can go about; make decisions • things are changing – there is much more competition	• you have to help yourself in this society • I know our community well and could represent it • I have to learn English quickly – everything will be different in 1992!

NOTE: The student will need a lot of help in making this kind of analysis – the tutor must help in the long run by reminding student of the process and encouraging them to keep reflecting on prior experiential learning as a continuous exercise.

BEING AWARE OF YOUR KNOWLEDGE & SKILLS

Example 3

Think of A RECENT LIFE EXPERIENCE *OR* What have you been doing recently?

Write it in the box.

On each of the broken lines (- - - - - - -)write a knowledge or skill which helped you in that life experience; i.e. something you had learned earlier in life.

On each of the dotted lines (· · · · · · · · · · · ·) write a knowledge, skill or understanding you have learned *from* your recent life experience.

looking after younger brother - - - - -

REFLECTION OR THE SKILL OF REMEMBERING WITH A VIEW TO THE FUTURE

Think of 5 things you have learned.

For each one, ask yourself:

- Was it information? e.g. facts, dates, details, etc
- Was it knowledge? e.g. a whole lot of information on one subject
- Was it skill? e.g. How to do something which you could not do before
- Was it understanding? e.g. appreciating a different point of view

All learning is a combination of knowledge, skills and understanding.

Successful learning depends on *how* knowledge, skills and understanding are combined.

You might like to remember why you learned some things better than others.

What does this tell you about how *you* like to learn?

Example 4

3. provide the student with an introduction to the present learning system, and its requirements.

The issue of difficulty in communication in English could be overcome in the following ways:

a) Assessment of prior learning and purpose of assessment procedures could be explained in the student's first language (printed leaflet, interpretation facilities at interviews with educational guidance and advice workers, asking student to bring someone fluent in both first language and English to the very first session, etc.)

b) students could be given time and a format for recording their learning history in whatever language they are comfortable in, and reference made to this record in ensuing discussions (written details are often easier to translate into another language, because the process of thinking of content has already been done)

c) tutor could draw attention to the fact that use of first language by the student to recall, revise and absorb information is a resource in learning and could accelerate the process of becoming efficient in the use of English, by adopting a 'contrastive and comparative' strategy.

Accreditation of Prior Learning

This is still an issue, in spite of recent developments in validation of overseas qualifications and special entry concessions for mature students. At the heart of the matter are:

a) pre-accreditation of prior study, and

b) accreditation of prior experiential learning

The refining of the procedure for assessment of prior learning, 'matched' against competences required for varying subjects/ courses would enable students to carry out self-assessment and take responsibility for proving their eligibility. I believe that

Example 5

'MATCHING' KNOWLEDGE & SKILLS FROM PRIOR LEARNING AGAINST SET CRITERIA

Entry requirements for Community Language Interpreters' course You could train to be a community languages interpreter if you satisfy the following criteria:	**What *relevant* knowledge and skills do you have? How will you show evidence of them?**
• 'A' level or equivalent standard in both English and a local community language (Gujerati, Urdu, Chinese)	*Up to degree level study in Urdu – English as a subsidiary subject:* *EVIDENCE: Essay in English?*
• ability to use sources of information (libraries, CAB's, etc)	*helping children with homework – knowledge of the work of CAB*
• knowledge of the community	*active member of the local community – concern about issues such as housing, schools, street lighting, etc.*
• understanding of the procedures for making appointments at hospitals, DSS, etc.	*own experience of being unemployed, having children – feel I know the system well!*
• understanding of reliability of public notices, information leaflets and publicity materials.	*EVIDENCE: Analyse a leaflet for words that create difficulty, simplify it.*
• willingness to use IT	*have a computer at home – did IT as part of 'Fresh Start' course.*

PLEASE USE THE SPACES BELOW TO RECORD YOUR PERSONAL MATHS HISTORY

Maths at school

What do you remember about the maths you learned? .....

.....

.....

Selected topics .....

Use of books .....

Tests .....

Other (please specify) .....

Method of teaching and language of instruction

1. Group work/individual work .....
2. Your feelings about the subject .....

   .....

   .....
3. Your reaction to the methods of teaching .....

   .....

   .....
4. Your way of learning/understanding/remembering maths ....

   .....

   .....
5. What did you like/enjoy about maths at school? .....

   .....

   .....
6. What did you not like/enjoy? .....

   .....
7. What language(s) did you use for learning Maths? .....

   .....

Maths beyond school

What maths/maths related learning have you undertaken since leaving school? College/Training/Work/Leisure.

.....

Maths in everyday life/work

When do you use maths? .....

.....

.....

How do you feel about using a calculator? .....

.....

.....

Have you ever helped anyone with maths? child/colleague/parent

.....

.....

What language(s) do you use when thinking mathematically? ....

.....

.....

Is there any maths topic/skill that you would like to know more about? If yes, please give details. .....

.....

.....

.....

Any other comment/information about your experience of learning maths .....

.....

.....

.....

Example 6

mature entry procedures already do this to some extent, and 'access' courses, too. What is now needed is a framework within which assessment can be carried out, and evidence presented.

Conclusion

The *process* of assessment of prior learning opens many doors:

- the door to active or conscious learning
- to developing self confidence
- to realistic goal setting and decision making about learning
- to valuing one's potential for development based on previous development
- validating the differentness of individual experiences as sources of learning

The *product* of assessment of prior learning is a positive statement about the individual, substantive proof both of achievement and the awareness of potential.

For all adult returners – whether native speakers of English, or recently arrived from the far-flung corners of the world – the opportunity to 'show' what their life experience is worth is the most 'student-centred' of all learning activities. As a teaching aid also, it is versatile and far more motivating than many a simulation in text book or worksheet.

Reading for interest:

Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development David A. Kolb, Prentice Hall, 1984.

Learning in Action, Roger Kirk, Basil Blackwell, 1987.

A Guide to Student-Centred Learning. Donna Brandes and Paul Ginnis, Basil Blackwell, 1986.

Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning, Edited by David Boud, Rosemary Keogh, David Walker, Kogan Page, 1985.

Adult Literacy & Basic Skills Unit, Kingsbourne House, 229/231 High Holborn, London WC1V 7DA. Telephone: 071-405 4017
No. 37 Spring 1990 **ISSN 0260-5104**